

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES
AND THE CULTURE OF
CONVERSATION

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5pt System 3b2 [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Gibian, Peter, 1952–

Oliver Wendell Holmes and the culture of conversation / Peter Gibian.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture; 125)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 56026 8

1. Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 1809–1894 – Criticism and interpretation.

2. Literature and society – United States – History – 19th century.

3. Conversation – History – 19th century.

4. Table-talk – History – 19th century.

5. Conversation in literature.

6. Dialogue in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS1992.C67 G54 2001

818'.309-dc21 00-068945

ISBN 0 521 56026 8 hardback

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Introduction

This business of conversation is a very serious matter.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*

This book brings to the fore – or, it brings *back* to the fore – both an author (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior) and a verbal mode (conversation) that have almost completely disappeared from our maps of American literary and cultural history. Losing Holmes, we have lost a brilliant writer and a provocative thinker. We have also lost a key representative figure in the American Renaissance, both the best model and the best analyst of the dynamic of conversation that came to pervade many areas of mid-nineteenth-century American life – in what was known, after all, as America’s “Age of Conversation.”

AN INTRODUCTION TO DOCTOR HOLMES

Holmes’ life (1809–94) spanned most of the nineteenth century, and for much of that time he was a household name throughout America, recognized by his contemporaries as a national character, even a national institution. For foreign visitors like William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, or Oscar Wilde, a meeting with the tiny, hyperactive, loquacious Holmes became as much a part of the standard North American tour as a visit to Niagara Falls. Well into the twentieth century, the Holmes name still stood in most people’s minds as a loaded, multivalent figure for a diversity of American possibilities. Playing a variety of parts on the national stage, he came to be celebrated as spokesman for and representative personification of American achievements in two very different fields – medicine and literature – and was acclaimed both as a voice of gravity and of levity, a Sage and a Jester, a man of reason and an irrepressible humorist, a neoclassical traditionalist and a free-thinking republican progressive,

a self-mocking provincial and an urbane cosmopolitan. But while Holmes played one role as the epitome of regional chauvinism – having given Boston its still-current title as “Hub” of the universe, and having named and defined the “Brahmin caste” of intellectuals so often associated with that New England center – he also made himself the embodiment of widely-shared national aspirations to intellectual advancement (unrestrained freedom of thought), sociability (the values of human association), and civility (the “etiquette of democracy” making possible broad participation in a common life) – all aspects of Holmes’ ideal of a “conversation of the culture” that might help Americans to break down the barriers of atomistic individualism, social hierarchy, or local pride.

The mid-century’s best-known doctor, Holmes was one of the fathers of modern American medicine, addressing and educating his countrymen as the leading spokesman for the medical field at a crucial transitional period in its development. At the same time, his poetry and prose works made him one of America’s preeminent literary figures for more than a century – both in “high culture” and in “popular culture.” Indeed, as the “Autocrat,” Holmes became an American Humor type who would take a place next to (and in some ways opposed to) the Yankee and the Frontiersman in the nation’s popular imagination. Much in demand as a traveling public speaker, the Doctor emerged as the most celebrated after-dinner talker in his day, defining a role (later taken up by Mark Twain) as unofficial poet laureate or toastmaster presiding over many of the huge banquets, mass ceremonies, and civic festivities so central to mid-century public life; he was also one of the trail-blazers in opening up the Lyceum lecture circuit at mid-century, becoming in that venue both widely popular as one of the first comic lecturers and widely controversial as a proselytizing Voice of Reason. When writing in this latter vein as a serious, free-thinking intellectual, the Doctor contributed a series of speculative essays about cutting-edge developments that placed him at the center of national debates in a surprising range of fields: in theology, psychology, and natural science, as well as in medicine and literature.

Doctor Holmes’ medical career took him through a series of revolutionary changes in that profession. Studying medicine in Paris for two years (1833–35), the young Holmes was among the first Americans to be trained in the new “clinical” method being advanced by his French teachers, and became a leading advocate for

this method on his return to the United States. Research along these lines led to several prize-winning medical studies in the 1830s and two controversial, ground-breaking medical essays in the 1840s: “Homeopathy and its Kindred Delusions” (1842) and “The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever” (1843), the latter of which anticipated the germ theory of disease by fifteen years, and was ahead of its time both in its analysis of the problem of contagion and in its advocacy of antisepsis as a solution. After serving as Professor of Anatomy at Dartmouth in 1839–40, Holmes later taught at the Harvard Medical School where he served as Dean from 1847 to 1853 and was Parkman Professor of Anatomy and Physiology until his retirement in 1882. Promoting French clinical research and observation in his teaching, and following his personal fascinations with new technologies of vision (microscopes, telescopes, photographs, and the stereoscope that he invented), Holmes introduced microscopy and histology in American medical study. Always alert to the latest technological advances, he read in 1846 of early experiments using ether to reduce pain in surgery and instantly suggested the name – “anaesthesia” – that became permanently attached to this crucial medical breakthrough, while in later years he gave important and highly controversial speeches on the state of the medical profession – such as “Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science” (1860) – and on the philosophical implications of recent clinical and neurological research: such as “Mechanism in Thought and Morals” (1870). Because he was, throughout his medical career, a supporter of the revolutionary Parisian clinical method, which discredited earlier heroic medicine, undercut the principles behind current diagnosis and therapy as “myths” and superstitions, and questioned the usefulness of many drugs and therapies in the existing pharmacy, Doctor Holmes was left in a position of “therapeutic nihilism,” promoting the need for close empirical observation of individual patients, broad statistical study of patient communities, anatomical investigation, and laboratory research (and thus breaking the ground for the bacteriological/laboratory revolution of the next generation in medicine) but offering little in the way of positive cures or treatments for patients. At the same time that he hailed the clinical movement to clear away old medical errors, however, Holmes was also associated with several of the important medical developments (germ theory, antisepsis, anesthesia) that would later lead out of the impasse of the clinical method, making possible key therapeutic

advances of twentieth-century medicine. And, as Freud did, Holmes moved in his career from neuro-physiological approaches to verbal and psychological ones, with an increasing emphasis on the dialogic interactions of doctor and patient – writing on the placebo effect, the therapeutic uses of laughter, the importance of counseling and bedside manner, and stressing microscopically intense observation both of a patient's physiognomy and of the pulses and image patterns of his dynamic verbal exchanges with the physician, finally developing an experimental, conversational model for diagnosis and therapy that is still suggestive to medical explorers today.

In literature, too, Holmes passed through a series of diverse phases, producing very prolifically in a number of verbal modes and genres. Although he first came to national attention in 1830 with the poem “Old Ironsides,” which gave voice and focus to early stirrings of nationalist fervor and was credited with having saved the U. S. S. Constitution from being dismantled, and in the 1850s he authored serious poems that instantly became standards to be memorized by generations of schoolchildren (especially “The Chambered Nautilus,” a haunting meditation on intellectual progress, and “The Deacon's Masterpiece: or The Wonderful ‘One-Hoss-Shay,’” a humorous romp that reduces Calvinist dogma to absurdity), as a poet Holmes was finally most widely known as one of America's most reliable producers of light verse for ceremonial occasions. But poetry was only a minor part of Holmes' overall literary contribution. In the late 1850s, when he shifted his primary focus from medicine to literature, Holmes launched himself seriously into writing – and achieved sudden national and international celebrity as a man of letters – with a series of humorous essays presented as conversation around a boardinghouse breakfast-table: *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1857), *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table* (1859), and *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table* (1872). These table-talk works are Holmes' most important and still-vital verbal productions. In 1857, James Russell Lowell had invited Holmes to become a regular contributor to a new journal he was founding. Holmes gave this journal its name – the *Atlantic Monthly* – and then assured its success as the nation's prime intellectual forum with these enormously popular columns that both recorded and shaped the talk of the town for a large American public. Inspired by these successes, Holmes also began to explore another hybrid genre, developing an early version of naturalistic fiction through a series of what he called “medicated novels” – *Elsie*

Venner (1861), *The Guardian Angel* (1867), and *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885) – that combine his table-talk wit and personae with aspects of the clinical case history to follow a series of anomalous life stories (involving multiple personalities, repetition compulsions, trauma-induced mental blocks, paralyzing erotic “antipathies,” and so on) that pose severe problems of diagnosis for the central doctor/psychologist figures in the novels, raising questions about psychological and physiological determinism and generally challenging conventional thinking about the “normal.”

HOLMESIAN TALK AND AMERICA’S CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

The aim of this study is to show that the connecting thread, linking all of the Doctor’s multiple professional activities, his diverse forms of literary and scientific work, and his active social life, was always his interest in the base model of “conversation.” First and foremost a talker, Holmes was unusually well situated to sense the ways in which talk or “conversation” had become perhaps *the* representative verbal mode of his age – central to the era’s spoken social discourse, to its written literary discourse, and even to its changing medical discourse. Even in his first professional triumphs – his Lyceum performances, public verse readings, festival toasts, and the medical school lectures that became phenomenally popular with a broad general public – Holmes was already most celebrated for his gifts as a speaker. Then, with his bustling social life centered around the verbal exchanges in drawing rooms, boardinghouses, and elite clubs, he earned a national reputation as America’s most brilliant conversationalist. Contemporaries would rush home after social events to write down or to repeat the Doctor’s latest *mots*, with typical accounts describing him as “the best talker ever heard,” “the king of the dinner-table during a large portion of the century,” or “the greatest conversationalist in the English language since Dr. Johnson left the scene.” Holmes’ witty repartee would set the tone at literary salons and dinner parties, and also make him a presiding figure at Boston’s renowned Saturday Club – where his sense of talk defined the verbal environment for those important monthly conversations bringing together Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Louis Agassiz, Lowell, and many other prominent figures in business, law, science, literature, and intellectual life. It was only

natural, then, that the Doctor would draw upon all of this salon and club experience when, in the 1850s, he committed himself to concentrated work on writing with his *Atlantic* “breakfast-table” essays. These imaginary, multivoiced dialogues now rank as classics in the “conversation” genre, and gave a new dynamic form to the English periodical essay. Rooted in the boardinghouse table-talk of nineteenth-century America, just as the early essays of Addison and Steele had been rooted in the coffeehouse discussions of eighteenth-century England, Holmes’ essays were less a form for lyrical reflection or sequential argument than a social experiment, a verbal laboratory for studies of the volatile “associations” between diverse people and diverse ideas. Staging tea-table debates between a wide range of uncomprehending strangers speaking for divergent ideologies in divergent languages, Holmes presented his readers with a carnivalesque festival of verbal pyrotechnics and comic misunderstandings that also developed as a miniaturized, caricatural model of the “conversation of the culture” in these troubled years just before the Civil War, playing out the rational and irrational forces shaping public opinion in this period, and perhaps making possible some detached reflection on the explosive, interruptive, and multivoiced dynamics of the “public sphere” in mid-century America. Finally, all of this talking and conversational writing seems to have led Holmes to experiment with new kinds of medicine. In his medical career, the Doctor speaks for a major shift from mechanistic physiology and heroic interventionism to the verbal and conversational aspects of diagnosis, caring, and curing. Preparing his later, speculative medical essays, he increasingly took talk as the prime site for his research in “sentimental physics,” and his medical treatments often took the form of a proto-Freudian “talking exam.” In records of Doctor Holmes’ medical sessions with his friends and “patients” Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, or in his descriptions of the practices of the doctor characters in his “medicated novels,” we will see how the physician’s main activity comes to center on carefully managed and monitored verbal dialogue with the patient. Here the Doctor’s work begins to verge on the new speculative psychology, and his most influential writings as a psychologist also reflect his grounding in the dynamics of talk: he became a prime theorist of the divided self (or of what his student William James would later term the “social self”), defining all mental process as an internal conversation.

OUTLINE: THE POLES OF CONVERSATION

Both as a scientist and as a writer, then, Holmes based his practice upon “talk” and the analysis of talk. Recent sociology in the line of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault has reminded us how much is at stake in what goes on at the dinner-table, in table-talk and table manners; Doctor Holmes’ model conversations can serve as a diagnostic tool in just this way, helping us to isolate the culture-specific pressure points in even the most mundane of mid-century verbal interactions. *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* does for the mid-century American parlor, club, and Lyceum what Schlegel’s *Fragments* did for the conversations of his Jena circle, or what Diderot’s *D’Alembert’s Dream* did for the salon discussions of eighteenth-century France: it recognizes in the era’s dominant discursive form the symptoms of fundamental social and psychological concerns and then transforms the record of random talk into a structured enactment of these primary cultural themes. The characteristic Holmesian conversation, for example, can be seen to develop as a bipolar household dialogue building out of explosive oppositions between the forces of “gravity” and “levity” (to use the crucial terms which connect literary, theological, and scientific thought in the period), and between tendencies to “house-keeping” and “house-breaking” (to use the terms so common to the era of Victorian domesticity).

Part One of this book (“Opening the conversation”) works to situate Holmes’ talk form in its larger cultural contexts, drawing out the implications of this vision of talk as it relates to and participates in key developments in the social, medical, intellectual, and literary history of the era. Chapter One (“The conversation of a culture”) begins with an overview of the oral culture of mid-century America, suggesting the many ways in which the speech forms of everyday social and intellectual life in this period – the “gestation period” for the literature of the American Renaissance – could serve as models for new forms of literary writing, and stressing through a broad survey of contemporary modes of oral expression that this could indeed be seen as the nation’s “Age of Conversation” as well as its “Golden Age of Oratory.” A wide range of mid-century American writers and artists were centrally inspired by the culture’s obsession with dialogic talk – or centrally concerned with potential dangers or problems latent within this conversational ideal. Many (such as Emily Dickinson, Henry Thoreau, or most especially Hawthorne)

focused on conversation as a prime site in which to observe and explore problems of the social in a culture devoted to the individual: hopes and fears about the invisible interpersonal powers at play during each exchange in a love relation or friendship; anxieties about the difficult negotiation of a balance between selfhood and sympathy in any effort to transcend personal limits either through intimate relations or association with a broader community. Others celebrated conversation as in itself a fundamentally progressive form: some (like Holmes or Emerson) seeing in the ongoing turns of talk the movement basic to intellectual progress and ideological experimentation, a fundamental challenge to static, monolithic, or monological notions of selfhood or of culture, while more activist figures (such as Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Frederick Douglass, or Sojourner Truth) looked to conversation as a privileged vehicle for their efforts at personal and political emancipation, community consciousness-raising, or social change. But perhaps most widespread and most crucial was a shared sense of conversation as a model for the larger culture: in this period, as again in our own day, the problems of American diversity and American dividedness and the possibilities for American pluralism were often figured as problems and possibilities of American conversation.

Chapter Two (“To change the order of conversation”) extends this contextualizing overview. Highlighting Doctor Holmes’ distinctive vision of dialogue as a non-synthetic verbal form built out of explosive interruptions and continual alternations between the diverse voices of multiple speakers, this chapter then works to situate his dynamic vision of American talk in relation to models of dialogue inherited from eighteenth-century England as well as to talk forms developed by the most significant nineteenth-century theorists of conversation: Emerson, Alcott, Fuller, and William Hazlitt. Turning from Holmes’ written table-talk to analysis of his everyday social conversation, Chapter Three (“The electrodynamics of conversation”) defines in detail the Doctor’s peculiarly physicalist sense of interruptive talk as an “electrodynamic” system, an “art of the contact zone” – the site of charged “collisions of discourse” across cultures and between truly polarized, heterogeneous voices – and explores his vision of the appropriateness and social uses of such a talk form in the fluid and fragmented culture of Victorian America. The following chapters then show how Holmes’ emphasis on such a mode of talk could inform his theory and practice in a wide range of

fields, serving as the fundamental model in social relations (Chapter Four: “The cultural work of Holmesian talk”), in philosophy (Chapter Five: “A conversational approach to truth”), in medicine (Chapter Six: “Conversation and ‘therapeutic nihilism’”), and in psychology (Chapter Seven: “The self in conversation”), as well as in literary writing.

Part Three (“The two poles of conversation”) traces more schematically what is involved in each of the two alternating poles in Holmes’ conception of interruptive conversation as a bipolar system: analyzing the Doctor’s vision of the dialogue between the voices of “gravity” and “levity” in Chapter Eight, and his sense of the dialogue between the related urges to “house-keeping” and “house-breaking” in Chapter Nine. Succeeding chapters then work to situate Holmes’ conversational applications of and plays upon the culturally defined “levity-gravity” topos in the contexts of contemporary intellectual and literary history as Holmes is set in a series of “conversations” with other related writers: with Melville, Sterne, and Dickens in Chapter Ten; with Hawthorne in Chapter Eleven; and finally, in Chapter Twelve, with his son, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior, who speaks most strongly for the post-bellum urge to “close the conversation” opened by his father during New England’s mid-century cultural flowering.

LEARNING TO READ AMERICAN TALK: HOLMES IN DIALOGUE
WITH THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

Relearning how to read Holmes and how to read mid-nineteenth-century conversation required the definition of a broad new interpretive context – an interdisciplinary method combining legal, medical, social, intellectual, and literary history with close textual analysis. The approach developed here was stimulated by a wide variety of critical work on the dynamic of dialogue that has emerged in recent years, in a number of different fields: in philosophy (with the conversation-based models of Richard Rorty and Habermas, or with the concept of a dialogical ethics in Martha Nussbaum and others); in linguistics (with new trends in conversation analysis, and with Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “arts of the contact zone” providing a dialogic model for understanding and taking advantage of the sites of meetings between cultures); in medical history, psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic literary criticism (with work on thera-

peutic conversation, doctor–patient dialogue, transference, and verbal diagnosis); in social history (with an intensified focus on the activities and dynamic economies of domestic life); and in literary history (with studies of the influence of “dialogic” oral models – the salon, coffeehouse, or carnival – on early developments in British American *belles lettres* and in the English and Russian novel).

The resulting revaluation of Holmes as central to the “conversation of his culture” redefines the context for our reading of other major literary works of the American Renaissance. Counterbalancing our usual emphasis on the native heritage of American Puritanism, Holmes reminds us of important relations with the literature and culture of eighteenth-century England and Europe. (Most basically, the Doctor’s literary and scientific writings highlight the ways in which the philosophy, psychology, and literature of eighteenth century Sensibility, which had evoked such a powerful response in early America, remained vitally alive through the early nineteenth century, serving as a crucial formative influence on the development of a national “sensibility” in this transitional period.) Expanding our traditional perspectives on mid-century conceptions of “Nature,” he explores the implications of such beliefs as they might be applied in literary naturalism, in modern natural science, or in the “Nature cure” of contemporary medicine, and as they could be associated not only with defenses of the country virtues of Adamic simplicity but also with promotion of the metropolitan values of cosmopolitan cultivation. Complementing our notions of Romantic Organicism, he calls our attention to American versions of an alternative Romantic Irony. Broadening our sense of the scope of American Humor, he defines the place of the over-civilized, self-conscious, and self-important figure of pedantry and urbanity who always stood as necessary foil to the Yankee and Frontiersman in the folk imagination, while also speaking for the vitality of a tradition of scientific and philosophic comedy coming out of Rabelais, Swift, Sterne and Lichtenberg, and continuing in America from Irving and Twain on into the present day. Finally, Holmes’ talk-based works complicate our stereotyped vision of Victorian America as dominated by a genteel culture of complacent optimism, leaving us with a very different sense of the spirit of the age and of its genteel culture. Developing out of a continual alternation between opposing voices, which means that every question opens into a multiplicity of possible responses in a process that unsettles fixed standards and involves an

almost pathological avoidance of direct statements or conclusions, the multivoiced table-talk writings which made Holmes a major cultural spokesman can be seen as representative expressions of the profound anxieties and indecisions of an “age of uncertainty.”